

Vet Tech Field Beckons, Even in an Uncertain Economy

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In A Time Of Rising Unemployment And Increasing Economic Uncertainty,

some fields still beckon with promises of continued growth, bright futures and handsome paychecks. And one of the most promising of all is the field of veterinary technology. Actually, many medical-related fields offer very rosy job prospects—nursing, for example, as well as a whole range of medical technology fields of one kind or another. Still, veterinary technology is right up at the top of the list.

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Why? The old law of supply and demand certainly comes into play when it comes to vet tech, and the reason that demand is so high for veterinary technologists is because pet owners are demanding ever more sophisticated medical care and treatments for their pets.

The days of leaving dogs and cats outside to essentially fend for themselves is long gone. Today, dogs and cats (and other more exotic animals) are not so much pets as they are family members. People are willing to spend thousands on medical treatment for their pets, and they expect medical diagnostic and treatment procedures previously available only for humans to be available at the veterinary hospital.

"Pet owners are aware of these options," said Dr. Richard Flora, dean of the Veterinary Technology Program at St. Petersburg College (SPC) in Florida. "As a result, veterinary medicine is becoming more sophisticated every day."

SPC's Online Programming Meets a High Demand

SPC's vet tech program is hot, in part because the program is available completely online. Students far beyond the confines of Florida can sign up and earn a two- or four-year degree and never set

foot in a classroom. Clinical work is accomplished in local veterinary hospitals, clinics or practices that SPC approves of in advance.

"For students who don't have an accredited vet tech program within a reasonable distance of their work or family situation, our online program means they can earn a degree from an accredited vet tech program," Flora said. "They love it because they couldn't do it otherwise—they appreciate the fact that we are here so they can complete a degree program in a field they have chosen."

The online program requires students to spend 20 hours per week working in a veterinary hospital, and that gives students valuable practical experience

while they earn their degrees. They learn practical skills either from veterinarians or from licensed vet techs. Their online instructors sign off on the various skills that they master. It is up to the student to find and secure the necessary hospital arrangement that SPC then approves, Flora said.

"They have to go out and market themselves and convince the vets that they should become a part of the practice," Flora said. "Many times, down the road when students graduate, they get hired by the practice where they spent time as a student."

SPC requires a written affiliation agreement with the participating veterinary hospital or clinic. SPC also provides skills and equipment lists so students can make sure the local facility has everything they need for their studies. The college also covers the online students through its college liability insurance policy.

"The students don't ever have to set foot in a classroom, and they don't have to come to the college at all," Flora said. Students can earn associate or bachelor's degrees, although they must complete an accredited associate degree program at SPC or elsewhere before they can be accepted for the bachelor's program. Bachelor's degree students can specialize in hospital management or in clinical skills.

Jobs no Shortage

With pet owners willing to spend large amounts of money to treat their animals, vet tech students know that they will have job offers waiting for them when they graduate. They also know that starting pay will be higher than it has ever been before.

"Since people are willing to provide the best health care for their pets," Flora said, "pets are living longer, and that increases the pet population. The level and quality of care is increasing, too."

Health care options, techniques and



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equipment available at veterinary clinics and hospitals don't lag very far behind those available to human patients. That means there is constant pressure to increase the skill and capabilities of veterinarians, who increasingly need the assistance and expertise of veterinary technicians. If vet techs can perform increasingly complex procedures, that means veterinarians have more time to concentrate on the things that only they can do—surgery, for example. It is those increasingly complex techniques and procedures that SPC, and other institutions like it, teach to their vet tech students.

According to Flora, recent studies show that there are about 2.5 vet techs for every veterinarian in modern, efficient veterinary clinics. And those modern vet techs are trained in sophisticated treatment procedures. They typically perform physical exams, collect and

analyze samples, perform lab work, assist the veterinarian during surgery, monitor anesthesia, take radiographs, clean teeth, provide client education, act as receptionists or office managers, and perform many other duties.

Accreditation is Key

The SPC vet tech program is accredited by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). The course of study includes education covering large animals, small animals, lab animals, birds, and exotic animals.

"It is important that potential veterinary technology students make sure the programs they are considering are accredited by the AVMA," Flora said. "That ensures the education they receive will be a quality education covering the important aspects of being an effective veterinary technician." ■